What Caused Henry VIII’s Descent Into Tyranny?

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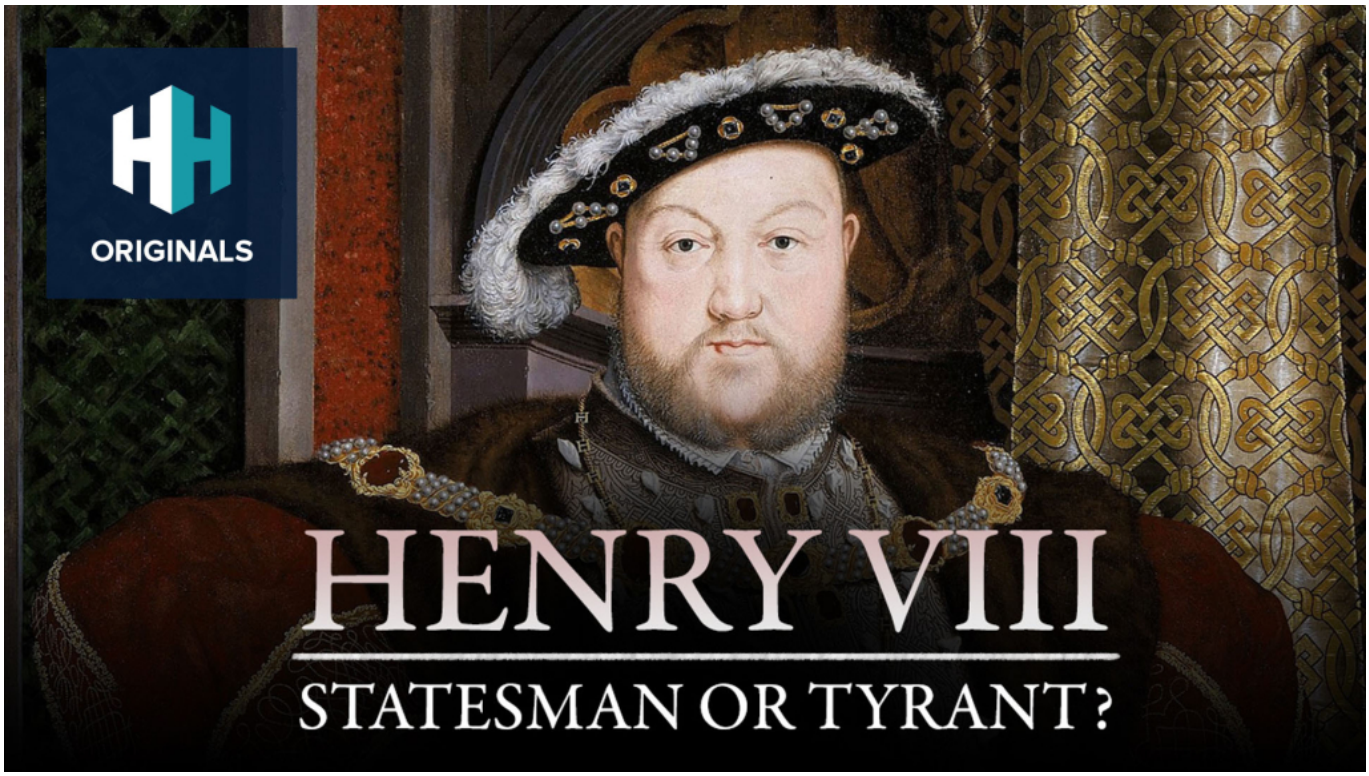
When he ascended the English throne in 1509, Henry VIII had wanted to be loved; he wanted his kingship to be natural and just. He thought of himself as good.

But by the time he died in 1547, the athletic boy whose cloth and hair was spun with gold had become an obese, temperamental monster. His reputation was that of a brute whose hands were soaked with the blood of the executions he ordered.

Below are some key moments in Henry’s reign that mark the king’s descent into a paranoid, megalomaniac.



On Midsummer's Day in 1509 a 17 year old was crowned king of England. He would go on to transform his realm over almost four decades on the throne. But who was Henry VIII? Man or monster, statesman or tyrant?

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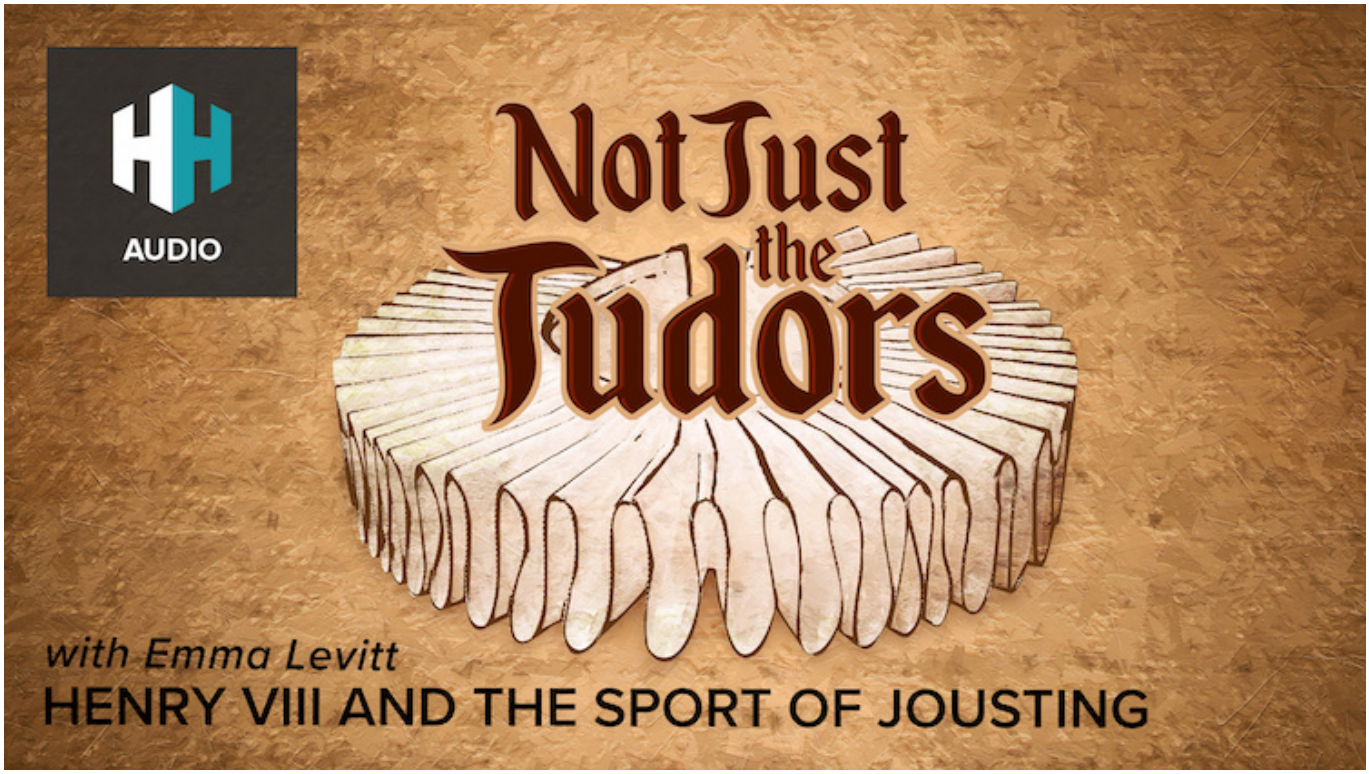
The road to Rome

Henry will be forever remembered for his marriages. Six, by far the most of any English king. He sought glory and immortality. His awareness of his dynasty and legacy grew more and more pronounced as he grew older.

In 1509, Henry married his first wife Catherine of Aragon, who was the widow of his older brother Arthur. While they had a lengthy marriage by Henry's later standards, Catherine had tremendous difficulty bearing children. She went through the trauma of having six pregnancies, but only one child – Mary – survived into adulthood.

Catherine had not borne the male heir that Henry believed would secure his dynasty. The Tudors had only won the crown in 1485 after 30 years of political instability during the Wars of the Roses. Henry became plagued with doubts that marrying his elder brother's wife had damned him before God.



In the world of King Henry VIII, the paramount place to demonstrate physical strength and manly courage was the joust – and Henry excelled at it. In this edition of Not Just the Tudors, Professor Suzannah Lipscomb talks to historian Dr. Emma Levitt to find out more about what jousting was, why Henry liked it so much, how it was scored, what it cost – and the culture of honour, manhood and physical chivalry that it embodied.

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Convinced that his marriage was unlawful and driven by lust towards one of Catherine's ladies in waiting, the stylish courtier Anne Boleyn – Henry sought an annulment. He asked Pope Clement VII for this in 1527, and he fully expected the Pope to agree. Henry's sister, Margaret, had just had her marriage annulled by the Pope in March of that same year.

But, in May, the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V had captured Rome and held the Pope as a prisoner. Charles was Catherine's nephew. At exactly the moment Henry asked for an annulment, Catherine's relative held the Pope as a prisoner.

Henry came to realise that if the papacy wouldn't bend to his wishes, he would have to break with Rome itself and establish his own church. What happened next would alter the course of British history forever.

The English Reformation

Beginning in 1529, Henry upended England's religion through the English Reformation. No longer would he bow his head to the Pope in Rome. He embraced a faith in which there was no international church and the divinely appointed sovereign was a kingdom's link between man and God.

Henry ordered the dissolution of the monasteries: religious establishments that were powerhouses of prayer for the dead, and controlled huge wealth and tracts of land. Between 1536 and 1540 over 800 abbeys, nunneries and monasteries were ruthlessly dissolved. Cromwell's inspectors produced evidence of 'manifest sin, vicious carnal and abominable sin'. Their riches and lands were seized, roofs stripped of lead, monks and nuns turned out and pensioned off.

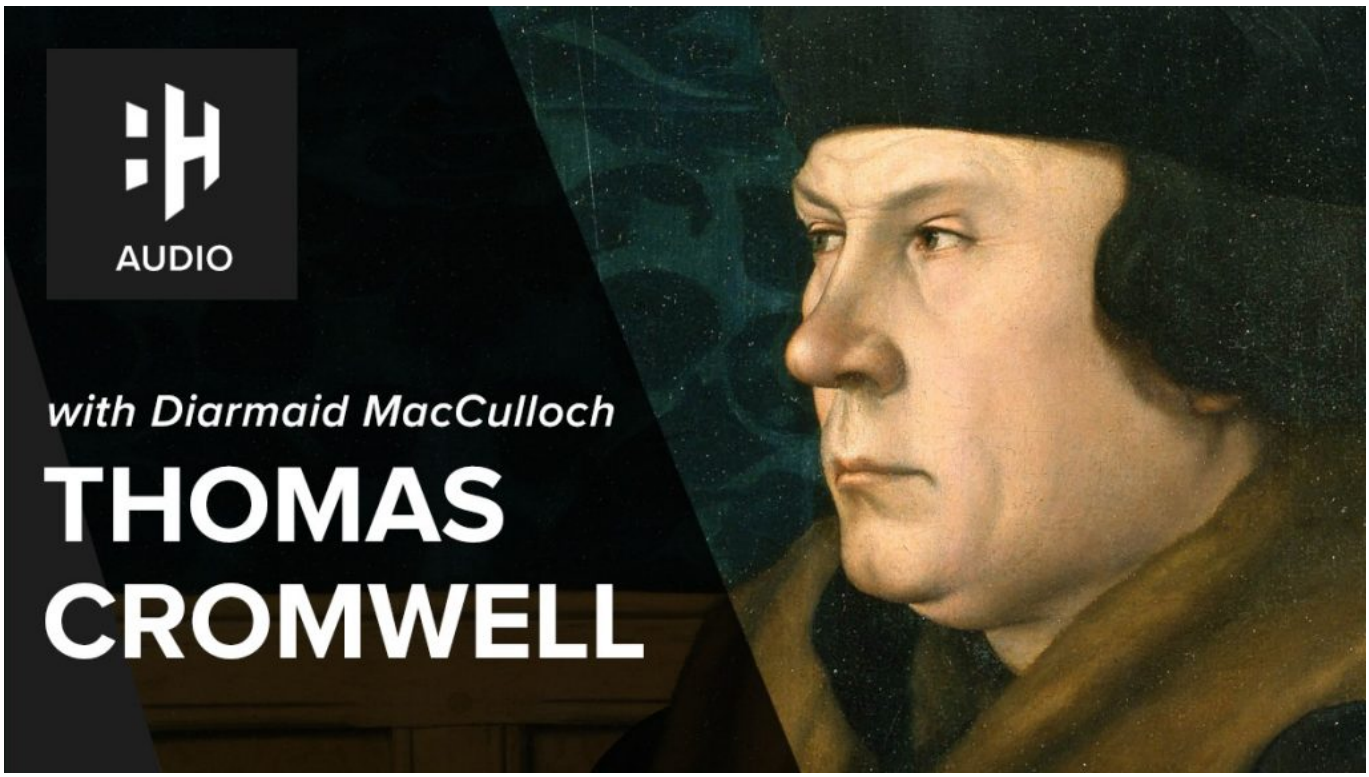
It was around this time, in the late 1530s, that the handsome, musical, intelligent, man who succeeded the throne grew vicious, capricious, and unpredictable.

Some have blamed this on a serious jousting accident in January 1536. He was thrown from his horse and was crushed by it. Studies have also concluded that it caused a brain injury that may have led to his erratic behaviour.

Henry’s blood-soaked hands

Henry wrought a revolution, b was vision for the future faced resistance. Rebellions, plots, foreign invasions came to dominate the king’s thinking. Ever more convinced that he was the sole true interpreter of divine will, Henry’s megalomania – and paranoia – grew. He became a tyrant.

While he had got his way and married Anne Boleyn in 1533, her failure to give birth to a male heir and increasing strife with the King led to her downfall. In 1536, with Henry seeking a way out of the unhappy marriage, she was tried for treason and adultery and beheaded.



In our first-ever History Hit Live in association with the British Academy, Dan talks to Diarmaid MacCulloch about Thomas Cromwell, whether or not the Reformation was like Brexit, and what is wrong with Putney.

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By August 1540, Henry had married for the fifth time to Catherine Howard. His third wife, Jane Seymour, had died from complications in childbirth, while his marriage to Anne of Cleves was unconsummated and annulled after just six months. But Henry’s fifth marriage lasted just two years before Catherine Howard met the same fate as Anne Boleyn and was executed for treason.

Henry was just as unsparing with his enemies. Chancellors and Chief Minsters found themselves at the executioners' block when they fell out of favour.

Thomas More, who had served as Lord High Chancellor, opposed the Reformation, and refused to acknowledge the annulment of Catherine's of Aragon's marriage. In July 1535 he was beheaded.

In 1537, Henry had mercilessly executed the leaders of the 'Pilgrimage of Grace', an uprising about the King's religious reformation. The removal of the monasteries had suddenly altered the religious life of many communities and stripped them of a source of employment and welfare.

In 1539, the Act of Proclamations attempted to bolster his royal power. From now on he could rule by decree, his personal edicts having equal force to acts of Parliament.

Thomas Cromwell, one of More's opponents and an architect of the Reformation also fell out of favour and was decapitated five years later. While Henry later regretted Cromwell's execution, he still sanctioned it, without trial, on 28 July 1540 – the same day he married Catherine Howard.

Terror and poverty

Treason had already been extended to punish those uttering disloyal words. Many would die horribly as a result. Laws were also passed against witchcraft and sodomy, which led to hundreds of innocent people being persecuted over the next two hundred years.

Late in his reign, his lavish lifestyle, the epic corruption of the selling off of church lands, and his aggressive foreign policy had brought his kingdom to the point of bankruptcy. He fraudulently replaced gold coins with copper ones in The Great Debasement in his final years.

By the day of Henry's death in January 1547, some of those watching his mute, terrified grab at Archbishop Thomas Cranmer's hand must have been relieved their corpulent king was breathing his last.

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